

Trading Posts along the Yukon River: Noochuloghoyet Trading Post in Historical Context

THOMAS J. TURCK^{1,2} and DIANE L. LEHMAN TURCK²

(Received 19 April 1990; accepted in revised form 17 April 1991)

ABSTRACT. Between 1868 and 1900, American companies established a series of trading posts along a 32 km stretch of the Yukon River immediately west of Noochuloghoyet Point, a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. This study makes use of written historical accounts, historical maps, and archaeological evidence to trace the founding and locational movements of these posts. Findings indicate that in the early interior of Alaska rivers were the major transportation routes, and the English and the Russians established trading posts at major river confluences, which became centers for trade. Later, the Americans pursued patterns inherited earlier from the English and the Russians. Political considerations provided the original reason for discovery and some constraints; nevertheless economic and environmental factors appear to have been the more important considerations in the exploration and development of the Yukon River valley. Cultural considerations were only important in that they bracketed the manner in which the Euro-Americans operated.

Key words: fur traders, trading posts, Yukon River, historical maps, historical sites

RÉSUMÉ. Entre 1868 et 1900, des compagnies américaines établirent des postes de traite répartis sur vingt milles le long du cours du Yukon, immédiatement à l'ouest de Noochuloghoyet Point, la péninsule formée par la confluence du Yukon et de la rivière Tanana. La présente étude se sert de récits historiques écrits, de cartes historiques et de preuves archéologiques pour retracer la fondation et les déplacements de ces postes. Les résultats indiquent que, dans l'intérieur de l'Alaska, les cours d'eau étaient les principales voies de transport et que les Anglais et les Russes établirent, aux grands confluent de ces voies d'eau, des postes de traite qui devinrent des centres commerciaux. Les Américains reprirent le modèle des Anglais et des Russes. Ce sont des considérations politiques qui furent à l'origine de la découverte – et qui y attachèrent certaines restrictions –, mais les facteurs économiques et écologiques semblent avoir été des considérations encore plus importantes dans l'exploration et l'exploitation de la vallée du Yukon. Les considérations culturelles n'ont été importantes que dans la mesure où elles ont imposé aux Euraméricains des limites sur leur façon d'opérer.

Mots clés: trappeurs, postes de traite, Yukon, cartes historiques, sites historiques

Traduit pour le journal par Nésida Loyer.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1800s, when commercial companies sought to exploit the fur resources of the pristine Alaskan wilderness of the interior, the Yukon River became one of the main access routes. The Russian American Company (Russian) established a trading post at Nulato near the confluence of the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers and the Hudson's Bay Company (English) founded Fort Yukon at the junction of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers (Fig. 1). Between Nulato and Fort Yukon is found Noochuloghoyet Point, a peninsula formed by the convergence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. Originally, this was a place where the Indians met each year to celebrate the change of seasons from winter to spring. Both the Russian American and the Hudson's Bay companies sent trading parties to Noochuloghoyet Point to barter with the Natives for furs but established no trading posts there. Later, after the sale of Russian-America, Americans set up trading posts in the region around Noochuloghoyet Point.

During his 1926 survey of the Yukon River valley, Ales Hrdlicka noticed that when early-period Athabaskan villages changed locations, but stayed in the same general area, they often retained their original names (Hrdlicka, 1930:136). This occurred because the initial village name was often a geographic place-name and construction of the new village was in the same area. Also, the same people lived in both the old and new villages. Frederica de Laguna again noticed this name retention phenomenon when she made an archaeological reconnaissance of the Yukon River in 1935. De Laguna recorded several abandoned sites with the same names, including two Old Melozis, four Lowdens, three Anviks, and three Old Stations. Anvik and Old Station had trading posts associ-

ated with the villages (de Laguna, 1947; Turck, 1991). In 1986, as part of investigations of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) 14(h)1 applications, Bureau of Indian Affairs archaeologist Ronald Kent and crew members relocated the three former Old Station villages. One is associated with the last location of Noochuloghoyet trading post.

Because of short periods of occupation, radiocarbon dating may not always be applicable to date a particular site, and artifact seriation dating of historical trade items, such as trade beads or ceramics, may span a larger time frame than the short period most trading posts were in operation. Also, due to cost and accessibility, pedestrian survey and site testing are not always feasible. Therefore, in many instances published accounts by early travelers and fur traders become the primary sources for both descriptive and locational information.

As the succeeding study indicates, however, even when trading posts' locations are well documented in written historical accounts and on historical maps, confusion may still exist. As with the Native village sites, problems occur because of vagueries such as calling a post by a manager's name or by a prominent geographic feature, such as Noochuloghoyet Point or the Tanana River. The purpose of this paper, then, is to trace the history of the founding and locational movements of trading posts in the Yukon River area, primarily by the use of historical accounts and maps. Oral history and archaeological evidence are also considered. Following the spatial relationship reconstruction is a discussion of the economic, political, environmental, and cultural factors affecting the founding and relocations of these posts.

Father Julius Jette' (1976:71) wrote, "The confusion between the three 'Old Stations' is second only to that between the various 'Nukluroyits.'" From 1868 to the early 1900s, trading

¹Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1675 C Street, Anchorage, Alaska 99501, U.S.A.

²Present address: P.O. Box 296, Hood River, Oregon 97031, U.S.A.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN AND BRITISH PERIOD

During the 1800s, it was less hazardous politically for private companies to claim new territory than sovereign countries. The East India Company acted as the political arm of the British in the East, whereas its counterpart in the New World was the Hudson's Bay Company. The Russian American Company provided a similar vehicle for Russian expansion into North America. The Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Company were, thus, not only trading companies, but agents of their respective countries.

After establishing themselves in the Aleutians and on the Alaska Peninsula, the Russians began to push north in 1819. In 1838, starting from St. Michael near the mouth of the Yukon River, Andrei Glazunov explored the lower Yukon, known to the Russians as the Kvikhpak. Petr Malakhov also explored the river in 1838-40, going inland as far as present-day Nulato (Fedorova, 1973). Later, a Russian named Derabin built a post at Nulato; he became the first *bidarshik* (head trader) and called it Fort Derabin. He was killed in the 1851 Nulato massacre. Afterward, the post was rebuilt and named for the nearby Nulato River. In 1842 Lieutenant L.A. Zagoskin traveled up the Yukon to Nulato and the next spring ascended as far as the Nowikaket (Nowitna) River. Turning back at a rapids, he later reported it was impossible for skin boats to travel farther upriver (Dall, 1870:47-52, 276). Captain C.W. Raymond (1900:22) later called this place Halls Rapids

after Captain Benjamin Hall, the first person to traverse the point with a steamship. The Russians established several other permanent posts along the river but none farther east than Nulato.

Agents of the Hudson's Bay Company explored the eastern part of the Yukon Territory. John Bell first made a reconnaissance of the Peel River, then built Fort McPherson in 1840. From there he crossed the mountains to the west, locating the Rat, Porcupine, and Yukon rivers (Murray, 1910:2). In 1847 Alexander Hunter Murray began Fort Yukon, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, at the junction of the Porcupine and Rat Rivers (in Russian-American territory). The Hudson's Bay Company operated Fort Yukon continuously until 1869 (Murray, 1910; Mercier, 1986:ix).

Noochuloghoyet Point (A) (prehistoric and historic)

Noochuloghoyet Point was a place of neutral ground located on a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon rivers several hundred kilometres downriver from Fort Yukon. Originally, this was a place where Indians from different groups met each year to celebrate the change of seasons from winter to spring. Around 1861, the Russians started coming to Noochuloghoyet Point each spring to trade for furs. From Fort Yukon, the Hudson's Bay Company also sent several parties of Indians to trade. In 1862, Hudson's Bay traders traveled down the Yukon as far as the Nowitna River; nevertheless,

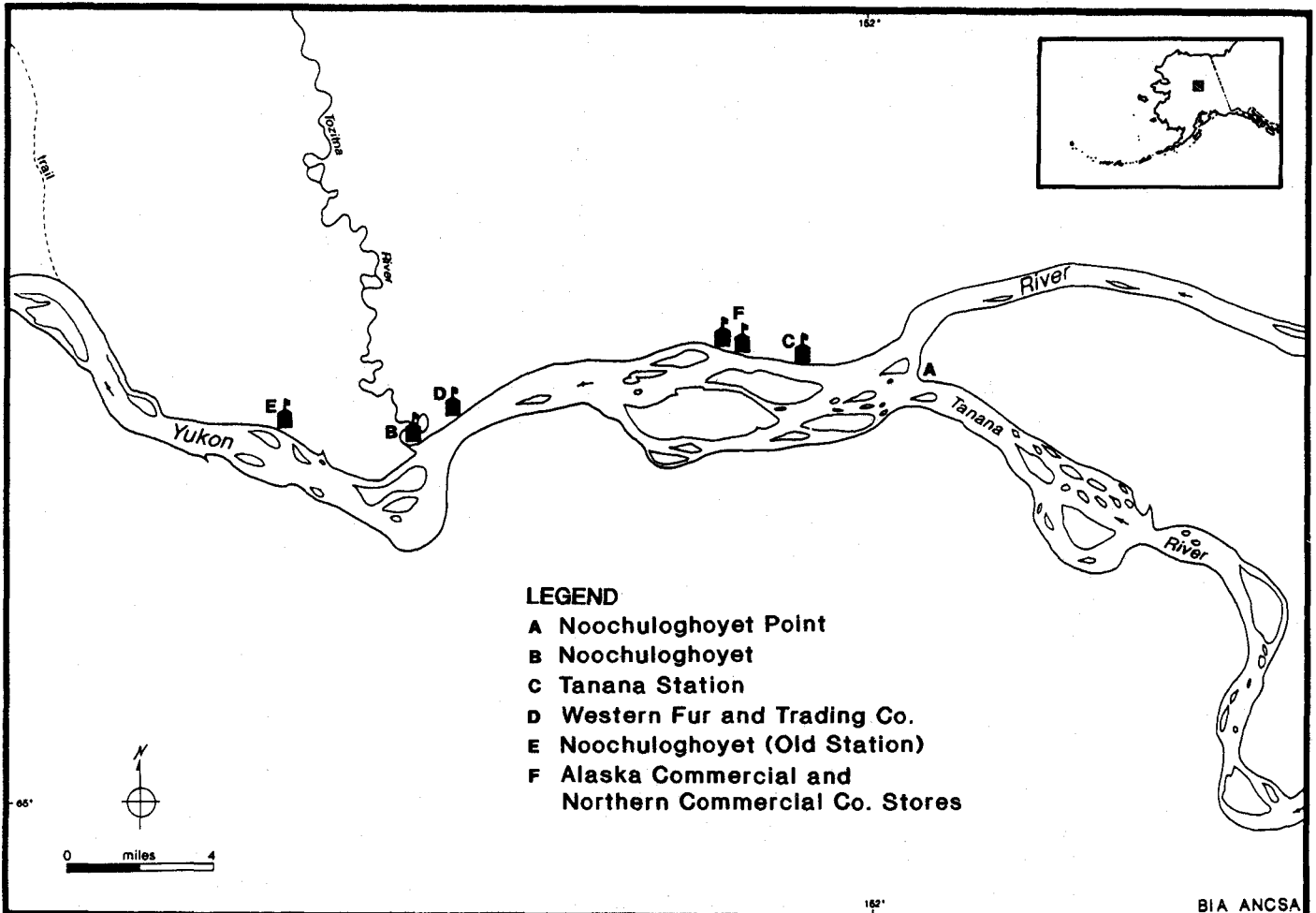


FIG. 2. Spatial locations of trading posts in the region of Noochuloghoyet.

they organized no other posts within Russian-America. The *bidarshik* at St. Michael learned of Fort Yukon from the Indians and became determined to learn more about the fort. In the summer of 1863, he sent a Creole named Ivan Simonson Lukeen to investigate. Lukeen navigated the Yukon River from Nulato east to Fort Yukon, linking the Russian-American and Canadian regions of the Yukon River. Although the Russians learned that Fort Yukon was in their territory, they took no action (Dall, 1870:276). The Yukon River was called the Kivhpak from St. Michael to Noochuloghoyet Point and the Youkon from Noochuloghoyet Point to Fort Yukon (Adams, 1982:133).

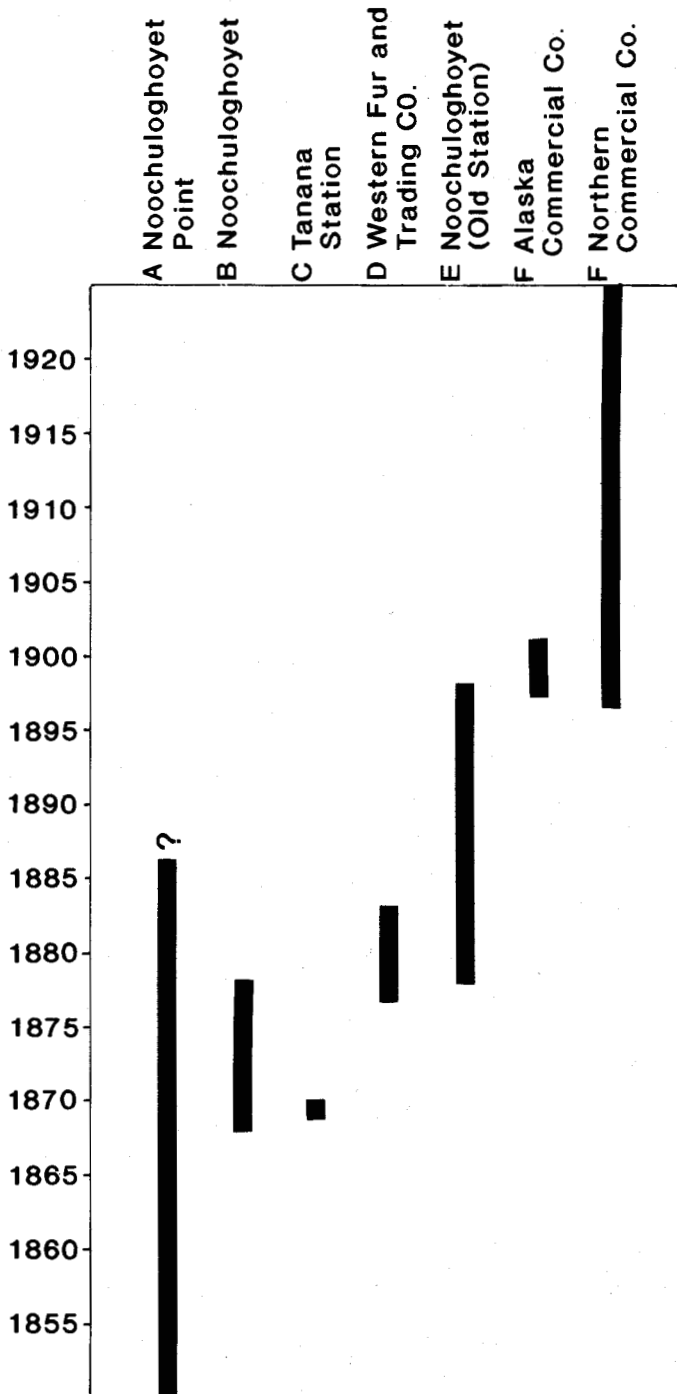


FIG. 3. Chronological time periods for the trading posts.

In 1866, because of difficulties encountered with attempts to lay a trans-Atlantic cable, the Western Union Telegraph Company (WUTC) sought an alternative transcontinental route across Alaska and Asia to Europe. To determine its feasibility, the company sent employees into the Yukon District. The first exploration party included Robert Kennicott (director), Frank Kechum, and Michael Laberge. Kennicott died of an apparent heart attack at Nulato, but Kechum and Laberge continued to carry on the survey work (Dall, 1898). In spring 1866, with Lukeen as a guide, they ascended the Yukon River as far as Fort Yukon; they then returned to Nulato and crossed over to St. Michael by portage. In 1867, Kechum and Laberge surveyed east again as far as Fort Selkirk and then returned to Fort Yukon. Later in the spring, starting from St. Michael, the WUTC scientific researcher William H. Dall and artist Frederick Whymper traveled east to Fort Yukon, where they met Kechum and Laberge. The group then returned to St. Michael (Dall, 1870:277; Dall, 1898).

The succeeding spring the party made a further reconnaissance of the Yukon District, traveling eastward from Nulato to Fort Yukon using a *baidar* (skin boat). They were accompanied by Russian American Company employees, including a trader named Pavloff, as far as Noochuloghoyet Point. The traders were escorting a flotilla of birch bark canoes that contained goods to barter. They sought the yearly harvest of furs brought by Indian tribes (Dall, 1898:91-94; Whymper, 1869:228-230). At the same time, Hudson's Bay Company traders made the trip west from Fort Yukon to Noochuloghoyet Point. Because the Russians, coming east, were delayed by current and ice, many times the "Scotsmen" got there first and purchased the available skins (Raymond, 1900:20). The Russians often had to settle for pelts from later Native arrivals (K. Arndt, pers. comm. 1991). After parting company with the traders at Noochuloghoyet Point, Dall and his party continued on to Fort Yukon. Later, they learned of the successful laying of the trans-Atlantic cable, which stopped the need for further WUTC exploration in Alaska (Dall, 1870:358).

CHRONOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN PERIOD

The sale of Russian-America to the United States in 1867 came shortly after the American Civil War. Because the U.S. government in Washington, D.C., was largely involved with the "reconstruction" of the South, administration of Alaska passed first to the U.S. Army, then to the U.S. Customs Service, and finally to the U.S. Navy. Other than the later discussed mission of Captain Raymond (1900) to dispossess the Hudson's Bay Company of Fort Yukon, these bureaucracies took little political action in the Alaskan interior for the first twenty years. During this period, after several mergers, the Alaska Commercial Company took control of the Nulato, Noochuloghoyet, and Fort Yukon trading posts (Schwatka, 1900; Mercier, 1986). Within part of this period, this company also owned most of the Yukon River steamers and thus became a principal influence on the river because of its ownership of several trading posts and its control of the majority of river traffic.

Noochuloghoyet Trading Post (B) (1868-78)

Fort Yukon was still in operation as a British trading post when Russian-America was sold to the United States in 1867. Two years later, the U.S. government sent Captain C.W. Raymond to determine if Fort Yukon was in Canadian territory